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SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR ADMIRAL TYSON

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission James F. Entwistle, reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary. Admiral Tyson, your visit to Thailand will afford you a chance to see the importance of Thailand to our regional security interests as the United States and Thailand celebrate 175 years of relations. You will also have an opportunity to underscore the United States Government's commitment to working with a democratically elected Thai government.

#### THE POLITICAL SITUATION

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¶2. (U) Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej and his People's Power Party (PPP) received a substantial plurality in Thailand's December 23 national legislative election. The new constitution, approved by the Thai public in an August 19, 2007 referendum, differs from the 1997 version by, among other aspects: creating term limits for the Prime Minister; establishing a partially-appointed / partially-elected non-partisan Senate; and creating multi-member electoral districts and regional party lists for the House of Representatives.

¶3. (C) Samak and PPP campaigned in the December 2007 election as allies and followers of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. The substantial plurality that PPP won reflected not only the effectiveness of the party's machinery, but also Thaksin's continuing appeal in much of Thailand, as well as widespread dissatisfaction with the interim government installed by the coup leaders. Samak and his cabinet took their oath of office before King Bhumibol February 6 and the inauguration marked both the return to power of a democratically elected government and a return to influence for Thaksin.

¶4. (C) Samak eagerly presented himself as Thaksin's follower during the campaign; post-election he has taken a more independent line. Local media have reported that Samak and Thaksin clashed over cabinet appointments but it remains unclear whether those stories were accurate or were planted to enhance Samak's credibility.

#### UNDERLYING POLITICAL TENSIONS REMAIN

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¶5. (C) Despite Thailand's peaceful transition back to an elected government, underlying tensions remain unresolved. Thaksin won an overwhelming majority in the parliament in the 2005 election, but he was accused of abuse of power, corruption, and disrespect for the monarchy. In 2006, months

of political protests and legal battles led to a political stalemate over charges against Thaksin and his party. The Royal Thai Army launched a coup d'etat in September 2006 after months of political conflict and many Thais accepted the coup as a means to resolve the protracted political crisis. However, most Thais soured on the interim administration as it was unable to solve underlying political problems. While PPP's victory last December was a setback for supporters of the coup, it failed to resolve the underlying political conflicts in Thai society. Tensions over fundamental questions, such as the balance of power between urban elite and the rural population, could lead to further conflict and calls for military intervention.

#### THE BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP

16. (C) Prior to the coup, bilateral relations with Thailand were very good and we are optimistic that this will be the case going forward. Sanctions were lifted February 6 and the RTG has signaled its willingness to return to a close mil-mil rela